

Responding to God's Gift

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- [0 : 0 0] Folks, wonderful to see you here. My name is Graham. I've got the privilege of being the pastor of the church here. It's just wonderful to see you in this, just the most special of mornings. There is a game that we all like to play at Christmas time.
- And you'll know that you're playing the game if you find yourself saying things like this. See if this hits home, okay? So, wow! Wow! A William Shakespeare tissue set!
- I've always wanted one of those. A grow your own crest, llama? No way! Can't believe I'm opening this. My very own personalised Marmite jar.
- You shouldn't have, Graham. No, seriously, you really, you really shouldn't have. I'm with a man about town in my new unmatched donut socks. And it was the only other night that I was lying awake in bed thinking to myself, there was only some way that I could agriculturally make my way through the days of next year.
- And now my prayers have been answered because I'm the owner of the classic Tractors 2020 calendar. So we find ourselves playing this game. You will know if you're playing the game.
- [1 : 1 5] And the game goes something like this. We offer Christmas niceties to the things that we look at and we think to ourselves, that is really strange. That is really strange.
- And I don't see how that has any relevance to my life, but I'm going to play the game and I'm going to put on the Christmas niceties. And here's the thing. You might be sitting here today and you're playing the game with the Bible story.
- Right? You're playing the game with the Bible story. We can all play the Christmas niceties. We can all say that was wonderful. Love that story. But deep down in our hearts, we're screaming to the world, I don't see the relevance of any of that to my everyday life.
- Maybe you're playing the game right now. That is a strange scene. And I want to take you back to those verses we read in Matthew chapter 2. If you remember the verses with the Magi and King Herod. And you think to yourself, that is one strange scene containing some strange people, giving some strange gifts.
- And to top it all off, it is in a strange place. I mean, Magi in Bethlehem, giving gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. That is so strange.
- [2 : 2 5] Is it not? It is so strange. But the thing I want us to see is if we look at the small picture, boy, that is strange. Right? We just focus on the small picture.
- Boy, that is strange. But see, if we lift our eyes to see what God, our creator, is doing in this moment, folks, it is magnificent. So I want to encourage you today not to play the Christmas game with an nativity story.
- Let's be really honest here. And let's get in to what Matthew is saying. Here is the scene. It is a little while, maybe weeks or months after Jesus has been born. Some Magi who are most likely pagan astrologers from the east have made the massive journey west.
- And it is a massive journey. Massive journey west. They have landed in Jerusalem. They have probably made that journey most likely because they have heard the stories about how a star has appeared in the vicinity of Jerusalem.

And they know from what they have studied that that star has something to do with the birth of a new king of the Jews. And so they get to Jerusalem and they have one simple question.

[3 : 36] Right? Where is the king of the Jews? Where is he? That is the question. Where is he? Where is he? Can you imagine the boy in the street corner of Jerusalem singing it?

Extra, extra, read all about it. Strangers in town. Strangers in town. And they are searching for a new king. New king. New king in town.

And we see two reactions to that news as it goes around Jerusalem. Firstly we see the reaction of King Herod. He is a man with a track record of anger and envy.

So he hears this news. And do you remember it from the reading? He was greatly disturbed. Which is Matthew's way of telling us that he is fuming with this news. Because we have to understand that as far as Herod is concerned, this is all out king on king.

Turf wars. On his patch. He does not want another king. And so what does he do? Herod. He summons some Jewish religious experts to help him understand what is going on.

[4 : 42] So questions must have come. Are these visitors from the east who've turned up here, are they right? Have they got the wrong star? Have they typed in Bethlehem instead of Babylon into their satnav and they've turned up here by accident?

Can you help me figure out what is going on here? And the religious leaders tell King Herod that these visitors from the east are buying on the money.

They've got it right. And they've got it right because these religious leaders that Herod summons, they know their Bibles. And they know what God had said about how he would raise up a ruler for his people.

A saviour, a king, a shepherd who would be born not just anywhere, but who would be born in David's city, Bethlehem. So here's what you need to see.

This is not a riddle that needs to be solved. This is not an exam they need to study for. This is not like the cryptic crossword in the metro that they find too hard to figure out. These guys have the answer.

[5 : 48] And to top it all off, it is not as if it's far to get from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. That is less than six miles away. That is less than here to Edinburgh Airport to go and find out about the news that your people have been waiting for, for years.

And yet what do these guys do? They get the knowledge. They know their stuff. They have the chance. They have the chance. And they do nothing with it. Nothing with it.

So here's two responses then to the news of God's king. Here on the one hand is Herod. He responds to the news of Jesus with hostility.

He doesn't want him as king. And here are the religious leaders responding to Jesus with apathy. They couldn't care less about this king Jesus. And maybe you're sitting here today and actually one of those responses kind of sums up where you are in life at the minute when it comes to Jesus.

Maybe you're a bit like King Herod. Maybe you're hostile to the news of this king. You see him as a threat to your life. Your heart is crying.

[7 : 01] I do not want him as king of my life. I will take an arm lengths Jesus. I will take a cute and cuddly mascot Jesus. I will take a Jesus that sits in the dashboard of my car and gives me a high five, gives me a thumbs up.

But I won't take a king of my life Jesus. Friends, Jesus doesn't leave us that choice. This is all in. Are you going to submit to him as king?

Or maybe actually you're like these religious leaders. Maybe you're here this morning and you're thinking, why should I care? Maybe you're apathetic. Maybe you're like these religious leaders. You've grown up in church your whole life.

You can recite tons of verses. You know the lines to so many hymns. You know the words to so many prayers. But you don't see the point of any of it. Let me encourage you if you're in either of those camps.

Then come and see what Matthew is trying to tell you. He helps you see the Magi. And how they have responded. They respond to Jesus. Because do you see how these outsiders from the east.

[8 : 05] These guys who shouldn't have had a clue about this. They come in and Herod sends them to find out. They go to Bethlehem. What do they see when they get there? They see the child Jesus and his mother Mary.

And notice their reaction. You've got hostility. You've got apathy. But these guys show us humility. Don't they?

They give gifts. They bow. And they worship. And here's our strange scene. Here is our strange scene. Full of strange people giving strange gifts in a strange place.

But here's why this is such great news for every single one of us here today. For two reasons. Here's the first one. Because of who these guys are. Who these guys are. You see God had promised his people.

This incomparably good and loving and gracious God. Had promised his people that he would come to rescue them. That when he would send his light into our world of darkness.

[9 : 09] When he would come. That this wouldn't just be good news for Israel. This would be good news for the peoples of the world. This would be good news for every single human being in the nations.

And these people would be drawn to God's light. And they would find life in the light. And of course what does Jesus call himself?

The light of the world. And I love this. The fact that God had even said to the prophet Isaiah. Talking about that day. That a multitude of camels shall cover you.

Right? People coming from unknown lands. The young camels of Midian and Ephah. All those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring what? Gold. And frankincense.

And they shall bring good news. The praises of the Lord. So there is something magnificent going on in this strange and random scene. And so as these pagan astrologer, magician types from the east come to Bethlehem.

[10 : 12] And who unlike Herod and unlike the religious people of the day, they respond rightly to who King Jesus is. Do you see how these guys fall at his feet and declare him God?

And here is God lovingly declaring to a world in darkness. That heaven's doors are now lovingly and wonderfully flung wide open for anybody and everybody to come to the light and have life.

As they respond like the Magi did to the coming of Jesus. It's good news because of who they are and it's cracking news because of who he is.

Because what kind of ruler would God kings be? See the term. What's he going to do? He will be a ruler. What's the description? What will he do? He will shepherd his people. Shepherd his people.

So here's what that means. That means that lost sheep will look to the shepherd to lovingly lead them. That means that broken sheep will look to the shepherd to love them.

[11 : 18] That means that hurt sheep will look to this shepherd to care for them. That scared sheep will look to the shepherd to protect them. And ultimately bad sheep will look to the shepherds to save them.

because the nursery rhyme was right. Mary did have a little lamb and his fleece was white as snow.

The child Jesus would grow up and declare of himself, arms open to a world, that I am the good shepherd.

How are you the good shepherd? I am the good shepherd because I've come to lay down my life for my sheep and give them life and life abundant.

And he would do that as he went to the cross. And I love it because the only other time, what do these magi ask when they get to Jerusalem? Where is the king of the Jews?

[12 : 22] The only other time that phrase is used in Matthew's gospel, king of the Jews, is when Jesus is sitting there, so he's standing on the cross, being crucified, and the inscription above him says, here is the king of the Jews.

It's the only other time it's mentioned. Jesus goes there, God's perfect, obedient son, taking the place of rebellious people like you and like me who have rejected our creator.

The Bible's word for that is sin. Sorry God, I'm in charge, no to your rules, I don't want you in my life, and as a result are deserving of God's eternal judgment.

The thing is that Jesus goes to the cross to take the place for all those who would look to him in faith. Jesus takes their punishment on himself so that all those who would look to him and live would be forgiven, would be adopted into the family of this magnificently good God.

And you see how we've got two kings on the scene here. Here is Herod, a jealous king, an angry king, an envious king who's used to lifting up his hands to fight.

[13 : 40] And yet here is another king born in the humblest of places, in the humblest of circumstances, and here he is described as a loving shepherd who will lay down his life to save others.

And this king who stands now victorious, having conquered death, who stands as God's glorious king and one day will return. And you see how Matthew in this scene is imploring the people of his generation, and he's imploring the people of every generation since to respond to the good news of this Jesus, just like the Magi did.

And I love it because this scene that starts with the Magi saying that we have come to worship him ends with them worshipping him. Book ended it with worship.

So here is Matthew saying, come to the king of light and have life in his name. Friends, there's a game that we all play at Christmas time with the strange things that we see. We love to play the game.

We love to say, a baseball bat complete with chalkboard. What more could a guy want? A sausage dog pen. Hey, I've always wanted one of them.

[14 : 53] But let me urge you to come and see what God is doing in this moment. Let me urge you to stop playing the Christmas game and to come and to do what these Magi did and fall at the feet of Jesus and worship him.

Come and see that there is none like Jesus and come and see the extravagant love God has for a broken world in giving us his son and fall at his feet and declare, hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace.

Hail the Son of Righteousness. Light and life to all he brings. Risen with healing in his wings. Mild he lays his glory by.

Born that man no more may die. Born to raise the sons of earth. Born to give them second birth. Hark the herald angels sing.

Glory to the newborn king. Let me just lead us in a prayer and then we'll stand to finish with our closing song. Dear God, thank you for this time of year when we get to stop in the busyness of life and remember that you so loved the world that you gave your one and only son that whoever would believe in him would not perish but have eternal life.

[16 : 19] And help us to respond to this Jesus today and every day of our lives just like these magi did who fell at his feet and worshipped him.

Thank you that as we look at the child in the manger what we see is your love for us. And we pray these things in Jesus' precious name. Amen.

Amen. Amen.